



# ATTITUDE TOWARDS EDUCATION AND CAREER ASPIRATIONS OF CHILDREN OF SEX WORKERS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Siddharth Dutt<sup>1</sup> | Dr. Roopesh BN<sup>2</sup> | Dr. Janardhana N<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> PhD Scholar, Dept of Clinical Psychology, National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS), Bengaluru-560029.

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor, Dept of Clinical Psychology, National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS), Bengaluru-560029.

<sup>3</sup> Additional Professor, Dept of Psychiatric Social Work, National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS), Bengaluru-560029

## ABSTRACT

Education is one of the important aspects of an individual's life. It tends to influence various aspects of one's life such as career, employment, socio-economic status and well-being. Children of sex workers are marginalized because of their mother's profession and live in under privileged conditions where the access to education is minimal. These children attend schools either run by the NGOs or government schools. The current study explored the attitude of children of sex workers towards education and their career aspirations. The data collection was done through interviewing 57 children of sex workers of both genders aged between 12-18 years. The interviews were analysed qualitatively through content analysis. The results showed that these children were motivated to attend school if facilities for extracurricular were available and also were likely to attend if the teachers were supportive and caring.

**KEYWORDS:** Children of sex workers, Education, Career aspirations.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the pivotal aspects of an individual's life. It has a huge bearing and influence in various domains of life of an individual. Education is found out to be protective factor which contributes to resilience and coping during adversities (Werner, 1995). Education qualification has clear association and relationship of an individual's choice of career or vocation.

In India, the total literacy rate is just above 74%, where 93 % of the population are educated till lower primary. Whereas only about 69% of the population have completed their higher primary education (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2016). The many reason for this poor statistics is the higher dropout rate of children which is about 18%, which can be primarily attributed to the extent of the poverty in the country. Children are basically sent off to earn for themselves and contribute financially to their families. These children after dropping out are less likely to find circumstances that motivate them to get back to school to complete their education. In addition to this, the resources available at government run schools in rural and semi-urban areas are poor and these families barely can afford for their basic needs, hence do not have the means to send their children to private schools (Bhalotra, 2009). Considering this, the Indian Government passed Right to Education act which allows any child of any caste or creed or race residing in India to get access to educational institutions either private or run by government.

Children and adolescent's attitude towards education is dependent on the factors such as attitude of family members towards education, socio-economic status of the family, availability of schools and the school environment. The parents of children coming from lower socio economic status are themselves likely to be uneducated or dropouts; hence they lack educational aspirations for their children. Further factors such as parental unemployment, prevalence of domestic violence and substance abuse deter or are demotivating for their children to have positive attitude towards education (Chohan & Khan, 2010).

Whereas those children coming from lower socioeconomic background, who have an opportunity to attend schools, are made to sit in over-crowded classrooms with poor facilities. In addition, they are often subjected to poor quality of teaching, teachers being insensitive to individual differences in children and slack rules and regulations. The schools to which these children go to are mostly understaffed and lack basic facilities such as separate toilets for both the genders, roofing and segregation of classrooms (Narayanan, 2015). With the scenario such as this it is likely to have higher dropout rates and negative attitude towards schooling or education.

Sex work has been a major issue in India, it is estimated that in Mumbai alone there are about 1 lakh sex workers. Women are usually forced to this profession because of poverty, illiteracy, desertion by their spouses, or human trafficking. It is estimated that in India there are about 3 million women/ girls involved in sex work. About 90% of the sex workers were between 15-35 years of age (Gram Niyojan Kendra, 2007). Sex workers represent a marginalized population that

faces many occupational hazards. They are at higher risk for violence, contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV and stigmatization (Sagtani, et al, 2013). In India where commercial sex work is illegal, the criminalized status of their work makes them prone to harassment and violence, are less empowered to negotiate safer sex, and are less likely to take legal action against violence and abuse.

Children of sex workers bear the worst brunt of all this. Adhikari (2013) did a survey in Bowbazar of Kolkata and found that about 1557 female sex workers had either adopted or had their own children. These children grew up without proper parenting or care and lived solely of their mother's earnings. Only about 36 percent of children were attending schools and it depended on factors such as economic status, mother's education and mother's relationship with the male partner. Children who could complete their education till 10th grade, usually find a vocation such as salesperson or delivery personal with local merchants or shops around the area they live in. Whereas children who dropout of school because of poor supervision by their mothers are found to be playing on the streets, running errands for the local gangs or clubs which have formed by the elder ones in the same locality (Sircar & Dutta, 2011).

Nowadays, numerous Non-government organisations (NGO) have been set up in the red light areas which work for the welfare and benefit of children of sex workers. The NGOs provide education either through opening up residential schools in area or sending the children to government schools around the area. These NGOs also act as day care or residential centres, where the sex worker mothers can leave their children, when they are off to practice their profession (Yerpude & Jogdand, 2012, Shohel, 2013).

Given these circumstances, relatively poor conducive environment and general poor support or encouragement towards academics, the current study attempted to explore the attitude of children of female sex workers towards education and their career aspirations.

## 2. METHOD

The research design of the study was explorative design. The sample size was 57 children of sex workers of both the genders aged between 12-18 years through purposive sampling method. NGOs working for the welfare of children of sex workers in Pune and Delhi were contacted and after obtaining their permission, children were approached for data collection.

Semi-structured interview guide used in the study was developed based on available literature and was given to 15 mental health professionals, who are experts in this field, for content validation. The changes and suggestions given by the experts were incorporated. The content of the semi structured interview schedule focused on the children's attitude towards school, likes and dislikes about their school, their perceived benefits of education, their career aspirations and their reasons for the same.

The study was reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, Bengaluru, India. Those children who were able to speak either in English or Hindi fluently were selected. Written informed assent was taken individually from each child and the written informed consent was obtained from the parents/guardians. The children were also explained that they could withdraw from the study at any time; confidentiality will be maintained and informed about limits regarding confidentiality. During the process of data collection, no identification details of the children were noted down to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. Each child was interviewed separately with the semi structured interview guide.

The responses were written down in verbatim as the permission to audio record was not given by the guardians/NGOs. Content analysis was chosen as the method for analysis of the interview responses. The responses were coded, then categorised and themes were generated. Descriptive statistics was done for the socio-demographics details of the participants.

### 3. RESULTS

The total numbers of participants were 57 children of sex workers, where 18 of them were males and 39 of them were females. Their age ranged from 12-18 years with an average of 13.9 years. Their education was found to be between 3-12<sup>th</sup> grade with an average of 7<sup>th</sup> grade education (Table 1).

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics**

No. of participants	Gender	Age (yrs)	Education (grade)			
		Mean (SD)	range	Mean (SD)	range	
57	Male	Female	13.9 (2.0)	12- 18	7.4 (2.7)	3- 12
	18	39				

#### 3.1 Content analysis

The themes that emerged through content analysis was organised based on the broad categories used for interviewing.

##### Education

Under board category of education, it was further divided into likes and dislikes about school, engagement in extra-curricular activities, attitude of teachers and their teaching methods, academic subjects liked or disliked and perceived benefits from attending school.

Under likes and dislikes of school, the themes that emerged under likes were- the school atmosphere such as having a big playground; ability to make friends in school; and having opportunity to participate in extra-curricular activities. Whereas having a rigorous schedule with no time for extra-curricular activities were disliked, along with perceived favouritism of teachers towards certain students and using corporal methods of punishment.

Themes that emerged under engagement of extra-curricular activities were- opportunity to participate in activities such as craft work such as drawing and paper craft; opportunities to participate and learn performing arts such as dance, drama and singing; and these opportunities were also perceived as a means to take up it as one's vocation or career in future. In addition to this, opportunity to participate in sports such as running, shotput, kabaddi, kho-kho and volleyball also emerged as themes.

Under attitude of teachers and their teaching methods, the themes that emerged were- poor quality of teaching, using harsh methods of punishment such as hitting with a stick for disobedience, giving too much homework and showing favouritism towards rank holders. Along with this, themes such as feeling supported and feeling inspired by their teachers also emerged.

The themes that emerged in academics were- preference and interest to study mathematics and science along with interest in studying local language such as Hindi, as it was found to be easy. In addition to this there was less preference and interest to study subjects such as humanities and other languages.

Under the category of perceived benefits of schooling, themes that emerged were opportunity to gain knowledge and know about the world around. Further under the category of importance of education the themes that emerged were, education for employment, to become something in life as there is no future without it and making oneself competitive.

The themes that emerged in the category of attitude towards further education were- wanting to at least complete 10<sup>th</sup>, attend college, pursue post-graduation and wanting to specialize in fields such as engineering and medicine.

##### Career aspirations

Under the broad category of career aspirations the themes that emerged were- field of education, field of engineering and science, field of medicine and health services, field of entertainment and performing arts, field of social work and self-employment.

Under the broad category of field of education the themes that emerged were- becoming a teacher so that one could provide education to the poor people.

Under the area of field of engineering and science the themes were- wanting to become an engineer such as in the specialization of software, mechanical or civil. In addition, few participants expressed the desire to become scientists.

The themes that emerged under field of medicine and health services were- wanting to be a nurse so one could take care of the patients who are ill and also expressed that they aspire to be doctors in the future to serve the needy.

Few of the participants reported that they aspired to be actors or become dance choreographers or become professional singers.

Participants also mentioned the desire to take up missionary services so that they could help the poor and needy. Whereas a few mentioned that they aspire to be self-employed, for example as tailors.

### 4. DISCUSSION

The current study explored the attitude towards education and their career aspirations of children of sex workers. The children who reside in the red light areas are found to stay in overcrowded narrow dirty lanes, within very small houses without proper sanitary or drainage facilities. Children who do not attend an NGO or receive their services are often found on the streets playing with other children, running errands, interacting and soliciting customers to visit the area who are often abusive and insensitive towards them.

The NGOs established in the area, provide basic facilities such as shelter, food and clothing along with access to education. These NGOs are set up within the vicinity of the red light areas, so that the children can easily come there themselves without any hazels. Usually, NGOs are overcrowded, with one care taker taking care of about 20 to 30 children all by herself. Thus this can prevent the care takers to be sensitive enough to the individual needs of each child coming there.

With these circumstances the interviews showed that children who have access to schools with the help of NGOs liked facilities such as having a big playground, getting the opportunity to make more friends in school, participation in extracurricular activities or sports. This could be because the sex worker's children live in areas which lack open spaces to play such as playgrounds and lack opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities due to the unavailability of sports equipment or peers to play with. Availability of such facilities acts as motivating factor to attend schools regularly. These children disliked having a very strict and rigorous academic schedule, having to do more homework and being subjected to corporal punishment.

Children had a positive attitude towards teachers who were supportive and caring towards them. They also liked teachers who taught the subject well and had good knowledge about the subject. This favourable attitude can be due to the fact that they are often exposed to people who are negligent or indifferent towards them and perceive them as nuisance, hence they likely to develop fondness towards their teachers who are kind, supportive and caring. Teachers who were punitive and showed favouritism towards rank holders were disliked. Teachers' attitude towards these children also motivated them to attend schools and reduced drop outs (Figure 1).

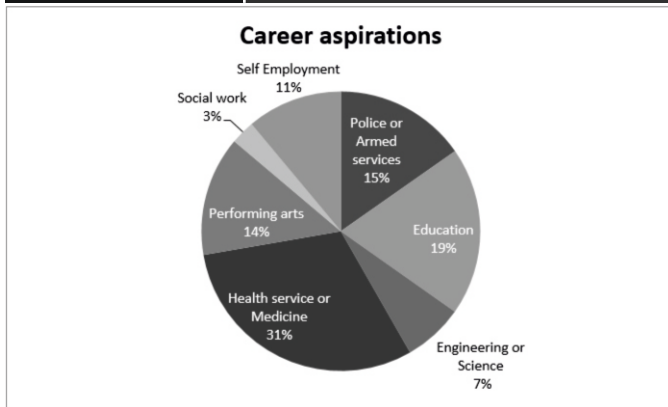
Children also expressed interest and opportunities provided to participate in extracurricular activities such as dance, drama, singing, drawing and paper craft work. They also participated in sports such as running, kho kho, kabaddi, shotput and volleyball.

Further, most children preferred to study and learn mathematics, science and Hindi, and less inclination or desire to learn subjects such as humanities and other languages. These children perceived that learning mathematics and science could benefit them in future with respect to their careers and also as most of them had mother tongue as Hindi, they found it easier to learn.



**Figure 1: Factors leading towards and away from education.**

Career aspirations of these children showed that most of them aspired to take up a career in the field of health services or medicine by either becoming a doctor or a nurse, so that one could help people who are poor and ill. The second most popular career choice was found to become a teacher, so that they could become like their teachers and educate others; which was followed by willingness to join the armed or police forces so that one would protect the country (Figure 2).



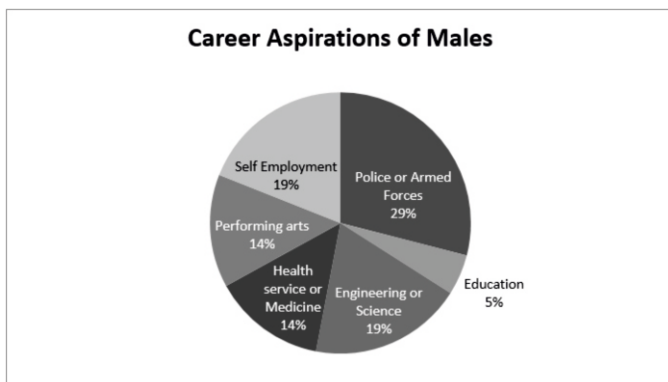
**Figure 2: Percentages of various fields of career indicated by the participants.**

The younger group of children's (12-14 years) career aspirations were more clustered around joining police or armed forces, in the field of education such as becoming a teacher and in the field of health services and medicines such as becoming a doctor. As these children belong to a younger age group where there are no pressures such as thinking of further education or taking up a career, they are likely to aspire for professions which are more commonly respected and talked about. The older group of children's (15-18 years) career aspirations were not found to be clustered around any few particular fields but were almost spread out evenly (Table 2).

**Table 2: Frequency of choices among two age groups**

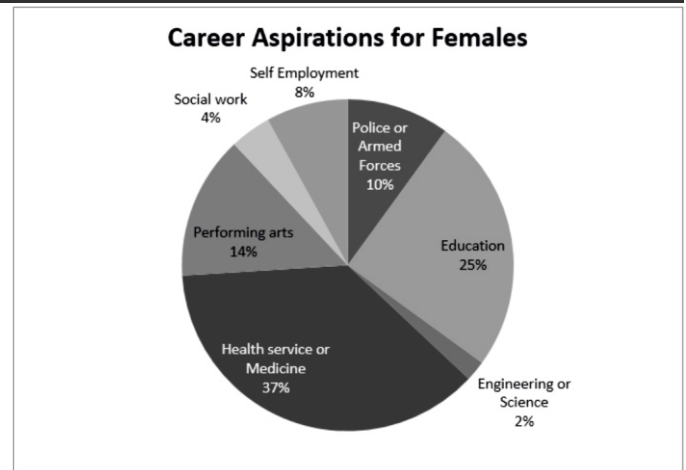
Career aspirations	Frequency of choices among age groups of children	
	12-14 years	15-18 years
Police or Armed forces	7	3
Education	10	4
Engineering or Science	3	2
Health service or Medicine	16	6
Performing arts	5	5
Social work	1	1
Self-employment	3	5

The majority of male children showed more preference to join the police or the armed forces, followed by second preference for taking engineering and science or being self-employed. Performing arts and health services or medicine were the third preference and field of education being the last preference. This could be due to the factor of gender roles with respect to masculinity, where professions such police or armed forces are considered to be more masculine and these professions are associated with masculine traits of bravery, courage, protectiveness and valour, thus the male children could have shown the inclination to join or take them up as careers in future (Figure 3).



**Figure 3: Career aspirations of Male children**

The female children showed more aspiration towards taking up a career in health services and medicine by either being a doctor or a nurse. This could be because that women are considered because of their gender roles to be more caring, helpful and service oriented, these children showed aspirations to take this has their career choice. Most girls also aspired to become teachers as they identified with their teachers who were supportive, caring and also considered as role models. This could one of the reasons which inspired these children to become teachers and help the poor children and be helpful in society (Figure 4).



**Figure 4: Career Aspirations for Females**

The limitation of the current study was children of sex workers who were not affiliated to any NGO could not be interviewed. In addition to that they were more representation of female children compared to males. In conclusion, sex worker's children who live in under privileged environment, marginalized or stigmatized due to their mother's profession, tend to overcome these difficult circumstances when the NGOs provide their help. We should be appreciative of the commendable work the NGOs do by intervening in the lives of these children, by working for their welfare and benefits, so that these children can have a bright future. Thus this study implies that setting up of educational institutes or providing facilities that make accessing education easier could help them to get into the mainstream society without being stigmatized and marginalized.

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